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A SUDDEN CLARITY

ETHEL NESTELL FORTNER

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A SUDDEN CLARITY

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"artist in word world, satiate"

A SUDDEN CLARITY

Words
light and small wait
humbly.

Two people
hear or see in some way
alike.

Words
ring out for both a sudden
clarity.

Two people
never again feel quite
separate.

Words . . .
How is it they can lock
two people?

WE LIVE AND BREATHE

"Are poets like other people?"
she asked, making conversation.

Real people
who tend the fires of everyday,
take up ashes, sweep the hearth,
also write. They trim the lamps,
light ways for others
even as you and I,
same singing joys, same sorrows.

Loving words
and somehow given the gift, they
shape thought to meaning, reflect
feeling with an awareness that
reaches and touches
until we echo: "Yes,
I know . . . that is the way it is."

How do you make an answer
for someone who has to ask?

CREATIVITY

Some will pause and care to see,
then there are the ones who listen;
paint singing words, a melody.

Work to simplify the scene;
(details gossip with the paint)
paint fresh words and clean.

Seek a core of truth sincere;
(mulling over dulls the colors)
paint lucent words, and clear.

Individual, yours alone
is your harp for listeners;
paint special words, your own.

Artist in word-world, satiate,
your palette is broad as color;
paint picture words — create.

LIKE A PIECE OF CLAY

a poem waits to be squeezed and kneaded,
pushed and prodded, molded, sculptured,
to become from shapeless mass, a thing.

Shine its shoes, send on its journey
through unknown travesty of judgment.
Someday it may sing . . . for someone.

MUSIC IS

prayer on lips,
wings on aching feet,
delivery from weariness.

Coming home
I shed shoes of care,
slip into spectrum of mood.

Velvet vowels of
Belafonte shut out the
world and ease my hunger.

Fear is a lonely thing.

THE INTERPRETER

Andrew Wyeth shows Americans what America is like.
Look at his people:

boy riding his forever bicycle,
Christina reaching for her world,
The Patriot wearing proud dignity,
Miss Olsen turning scarred world
to kitten warmth.

He lived the thing that nourished him
in sepias of everyday and white excitement.
Look at Chadds Ford:

a limebank dry gleaming in moonlight,
crucifix scarecrow stretched threadbare,
Quaker ladies bow down a hillside,
lace curtains billow in sea wind
and time holds its breath.

SMALL REQUEST

Ruby throated hummingbirds hover to sip
weigela cups outside my window; I pause
with poised pen at my note-heavy desk:
May this be kept in trust for me —
another spring.

Sandpipers feed at the tide edge and run
with the rolling waves; I tramp wet sand
and they move ahead up the surging surf,
white wing bars patterning their flight:
May this be kept in trust for me
another autumn.

SWIRL OF WORDS

Fifty poems read for one written,
seeking impact in today's poetry,
I am worded up to here;
take my mental temperature.

wade murky waters
fishing for S-curve
trip over robins/rainbows
in path of hunt
slip on slime
left by truth searchers trying
new ways to scorch paper

If I leave familiar waters
to chance impingent rocks
in craft unstrong for vortex whorl:
I will need a better ladder.

II

"whisper of secrets he cannot see"

IN THE LONG SEARCH

for cosmic companions
we wondered
if Mars,
maybe?

Four mariners later
our robots report:
earth must be
unique.

Builders, workers, worshipers,
in all this vastness
are we the
only

searchers?

RADIO TELESCOPE

Earth is tuned with great cupped ears
listening to waves from farther stars.
With distant faith man hears

whisper of secrets he cannot see;
probing for truth, his mind-flowers bloom,
expand our solar galaxy.

ONCE A GODDESS

In the untroubled tone of dawn
pale glow of Venus marked the morning,
when Mariner II went soaring
through windless, weightless space,
golden pinions gleaming.

Laden with curious instruments
it curved in its course to consider
her secrets; frail antennae absorbed
message of mystic music,
returned melange of symbols.

Man deciphered the intricate code
and all mystery was sheared away;
his unyielding faith rewarded:
her heat, her clouds, her gales,
measured now . . . poor barren star.

FRONT PAGE

With pride we read
of chosen astronauts:
Gemini-Agena docking,
their walk in space,
highest yet.

On the same page
we read of angry threats:
around a school in Grenada
a newsman is beaten,
a boy limps.

Like in curved glass
images distort our minds,
bright particles in the wake
matter less as
windows darken.

WAITING

Thermonuclear war? I look for answers
in the proud, clean sky and listen.

The sultry summer noon is still,
but for the bees drowsing the flowers:
cosoms, red-gold, and mignonette.
Lazy in lawn chair with thirst lime-cooled,
I treasure the touch of sun-warmed earth.
This is real: this calm warm luxury,
this midday sun. I close my mind
to the brutal balance of man-made terror.

But no: the figment fear remains;
clouds could rise, dark with rain,
loud with thunder to mar the summer
silence, destroy this dream of peace.

TWO WARS LATER, AMY

Peace
brought him back to me
after three lost years
bitterly resented then,
forgotten now.

From numbness I wakened
to live again and flow
in our depth of understanding
postwar.

Today
others are waiting
out their separations
with sullen fear and
fragile hope.

My hopes for these
walk softly while
I curse the pattern
called war.

"woven by man into his pattern"

WARM ICE

I remember the iceman: his roan horse
turned down our tree lined street
drawing cold load in green wagon,
stopped in front of my grandmother's house.

Swinging the white gate, pigtails flying,
I watched him jump down, pull burlap aside,
heard the chip-chink as ice pick precision
cleft crystal to prism sized for cooling

our zinc-lined chest on the vine covered porch.
Children followed this tinkling piper.
Swinging curved tongs and whistling,
he stopped to dispense the chill chips.

"Hello, Susie," (all small girls were Susie)
"How would you like some warm ice today?"
"Yes, please, Mister!" I held out cupped hands.
He drove away. I shivered. "But, Grandma,

he said it was warm ice . . .?" Over the years
when warm expectancies have turned glassy-cold
to my touch, I am barefoot again in hot dust,
looking down the road after the iceman.

NO GREENER GRASS

We always want to go
far away
to some more perfect place,
but where?

Must always poison oak,
or pollen,
or some other damned unwanted thing
be there?

Bound by dirt and noise and kids,
my mother
wished for a mountain top
somewhere.

Time came we could give her
a crested hill;
Freedom she found . . . It was
lonely there.

ESSENCE

You are gone :

I find a vase you bought .

Listening alone

I hear a song you taught .

Now in this room

I see a picture you framed .

Walking the garden

I touch a rose you named .

In a wisp of wind

I feel caressing fingers .

You are gone :

but fragrance of you lingers .

IN A DREAM

i hunted for my place at tables . . . tables
crowded with people
eating rice and fish

i crawled through noise/picked up spilled rice
grain by grain
grain by grain

i found the space that had been saved for me
(and neatly laid) between
my remembered grandmother
and
the child i did not have

OPEN THE DOOR

Don't live on dead love,
closed door, drawn shade,
candle flame in the night.
Love isn't there.

Bells ring in the bell towers:
listen to the bells.

Fish boats plow furrows up-river
in world rain-clean, flower-bright:
watch the boats come.

Don't live on dead love:
there is no step upon the stair.

SINGING IN THE QUICKSAND

Mountains
fade into distant
shimmer of faith, but thereness
finds firm rock because you are
stubborn.

We know
the world stinks,
but wear good face, look up,
pretend, you and I, because we are
optimists.

Plastic
flowers have no
fragrance. We will search
broken dreams for hyacinths with
enthusiasm

and send
our love across
the miles on paper wings
from opposite corners because we are
sensitive.

POVERTY

Poor in spirit and goods
One tries to take a stand:
Verily, this much must be.
Each irreducible minimum
Rung by rung lowered,
Then settle for even less:
You have known POVERTY.

(Sette Bello)

HUNTING SEASON

Practicing at targets, sighting-in the guns,
making ready for an artificial season
when a man made law condones the urge to kill.

Run, gentle deer.

Guns are oiled, boots for tramping,
gear for camping packed and stowed
for invading of the sheltering upland wood.

Hide, gentle deer.

This is his primeval rite for proving manhood?
The thrill he gets of tracking down a trophy
in a red hat for protection from his kind?

GINSENG

Our elderly neighbor
raised herbs on his small farm
for the Chinese trade. He allotted
sun to the tender plants with
frames of lath and nursed them
through seasonal cycle, green flower,
scarlet berry.

The elixir ginseng,
relieves fatigue of body and
mind, or so they believe
in China. Roots, valued by their
likeness in shape to human form,
are dried, wrapped in silk,
hidden away.

Such a strange talisman,
to be woven by man into his pattern,
to exorcise what dark and
dripping fears?

LEARN TO LISTEN

Listen for love in the little sounds
when chimes ring home the one who cares;
feet scraping mat so not to track,
the closing door to keep in warmth.

Listen for love in voice and tone
that only teases the one beloved.
Know the chiding was meant to help;
you are held in pride or he would not say.

Listen for love in the quiet sounds:
sigh of contentment for living shared,
the kitten's rythmic purred response.
Learn to listen for sounds of love.

"arriving there, I hope to find"

AIR FORCE ACADEMY CHAPEL

At dusk the lighted columns shine
across the valley, from this shrine

built with rows of airborne spires.
Rooms for worship: each inspires

a separate faith in structure created
as monument to faiths related.

With lifted wings, saluting space,
it brushes heaven with awesome grace.

ROUND BUTTE DAM

Through juniper, sage, wild oats
I walked to watch the building of the dam
in this high, dry desert.

From massive sweep of rim-rock
down carved cliffs to the floor below:
mammoth machinery crawling,
moving rock and earth
making a wall to hold the might of water.

Powerful river tunnelling through mountain
to the spillway, frothing white foam
feathered to darkened jade.

A chasm will fill with green stillness;
Reviere des Chutes, River of the Falls,
lines heavy with power will lead
from your fish-filled waters to serve our homes.
(Bless this power to our use.)

I turn to go: a rabbit runs to his burrow,
a quail crosses the road
and Round Butte Mountain watches

PRAYER

Honda, bright Honda,
ripping down the road,
roaring down the highway
with your precious load

of avid youth exulting
in new found freedom's charm
but Honda, bright Honda,
keep him safe from harm.

LA GRANDE

Long flat rumble announced distant train
crossing the desert ; I leaned from my window
to watch freight flash past green cottonwoods
beyond square houses that squatted in squalor.

Boxcars burned railroad red:
Burlington, Baltimore, Union Pacific.
Refrigerator ochre: Pacific Fruit Express
bearing freshness across a prairie.

Flat cars loaded: blue trailers, red tractors,
green combines, lumber, a silver grey tanker
labeled chemicals. Rolling stock shuddered,
jerked with the raucous roar of the signal.

The diesel ahead slowed for the station,
Rock Island, Soo Line, the yellow caboose.
Such force, heavy progress, speeding must need
firmness of rails to protect against tangents.

"SOME TIME TO KILL"

, i heard the random someone say
at the railway station , . . ? who
whiles away running days
imploding
with avid awareness/hours too few
for fervent need ?

in the slow ingredient of time
minutes worn by use slip by
forgotten . . . but leave their mark;

when mice gnaw in night walls
and we know indefinable loss :
we recognize the killer .

FIRST FLIGHT

We circled Puget Sound and soon lost Seattle
as the jet accelerated above the gray haze.

Through rifts in the mist fingers of land
merged with the water, blue into green.

Fir-timbered hills billowed, blue shadowed,
patched with black where fires left scars.

Farm geometry inlaid the valleys;
St. Helen's white cone, the point of Hood,

"Approaching Portland" — (so soon? so soon?)
Thirty-two minutes from there to home!

MORE THAN ONE LEBANON

The artist, showing a canvas, spoke on —
'I painted men fishing in Lebanon. '

Eyes turn in on our narrow rounds;
we live out lives by rule of three.
(fishing for trout in the Santiam?
my thinking bound by locality)
Horizons widened . . . our artist friend
was bringing us shores of Galilee!

"This street in Spain in brilliant sun '
Remember, I murmured, there is more than one

TROPIC FLOWER

Bird of paradise, unusual flower,
distills a memory: how much of reality,
how much illusion?
A green lady spreading a bright fan,
so perfect she seems artificial.

Bird of paradise, exotic flower,
keep for me the reality, the illusion
of this tropic isle I knew.

GLEAN AS I GO

Somewhere: a place I always want to go!
Arriving there, I hope to find a brook,
meadow high where freshet winds will blow;
there stand upon a rocky crag and look
away to follow down a memory trail,
and find within the long sought deeper springs
and clumps of wood and sumac hiding quail,
an awakening to blessing — whir of wings.

Somewhere — now find myself on verge of there;
does it match the hope and thought, as deep,
as sparkling clean through washed and lucid air?
From the past are things that I must keep,
yet surge ahead to trace a path up hill:
glean as I go, but hunt for somewhere, still.

"in chill wind I make my choices"

WINTER MORNING: OREGON

Patterns of firs emerge from distant mist,
cool fog pools slide softly over green
as rain cloud curtains drift on the wind.

A flock of finches settles on branches
of hazel bush, bringing the brightness
of their raspberry heads to cheer the day.

Then winter's pale sun lightens the patterned sky.

WOODS AWAKENING

Winter woods wait, shadowed, dank.
My boots sink in pale stems of rank,
grey bracken and crisp leaves to loamy bank.

Spring-green mosses in fern design creep
to cover stones, stumps rotting deep.
Lichens cling to logs, fairy cups peep.

Tangled webs of blackberry trail
catching at clothes. Seed feathers sail
where magenta fireweed flared in autumn swale.

Alders dangle drooping tassels;
filtered sun shafts light the mantle
of gold skunk weed caravel.

FALSE SPRING

The sun bright day invited me;
the daffodils nodded as I passed by
and somewhere I heard a robin trill.

I looked to the distant hills to see
a powder of snow; clear cold the sky
and the breeze that stroked my cheek was chill.

I heard it pass with a hint of regret
as it said to my heart: not yet, not yet.

HOW APPROPRIATE

In my dictionary (an old one)
after crocus
comes Croesus.

Croesus is a noun:
King of Lydia
way back when,
won by conquest
proverbial wealth.

Crocus is a noun:
Greek for saffron;
flowers of gold
border a flowerbed
creating my riches.

NEW ROADS

We dream drove down red road bedded with lava,
shafting through high pines of Metolius country.

By Breitenbush River we curved through tall firs
and salal, with a slanting sun slicing green shadows.

Where but in Oregon, such lilt of lush summer?

AUTUMN CROCUS

Last spring tall leaves grew lush,
forgot to bloom and withered,
disappeared into emerald lawn.

Now Indian summer, hot dry September
and a tender, pale purple point
surprises the dry ground.

Soon a ring of crocus
like fairy orchids in the sere grass
toss springtime lei to departing summer.

WOULD THAT I

In wandering waves the snow geese
in perfect flight formation
above the earth, below the clouds
make mid-October migration.

A farm dog echoes in the night;
I wake to the honking vibration,
Would that I also were sure
of my goal, my destination.

DECISIONS OF AUTUMN

We have choices
when toleration reaches a point of;
let go, start fresh when season turns,
or cope with an ugly thing
standing for a thing once beautiful.

Take a garden:
a burgeoning joy in August sun,
sinks to a jumble in November rain.
Overripe cucumbers streak yellow
under limp leaves;
tomatoes rot in weed vine tangles,
a late aster flares.

My garden path
is slippery now. In chill wind
I make my choices, pick the purple aster
and gather the pieces of my day.
Parsnips will sweeten after first frost.

NOVEMBER ROSE

I brought in a single rain-beaten rose
so brave to be open in chill November:
no bees, no sun. My heart knows
the urge to blossom, the need to remember
and cling to summer. My Dainty Bess,
the lift of your glowing cup will commune
with me, your pure pink petals will bless.
let other roses bloom in usual June.

VI

"a touch of shadow on shine"

COUNTING THE HERD

We walked that morning
past blossoming plum; watched swerving
violet-green swallows gather mud
for nests in the barn eaves, curving
and dipping.

Out counting the cows
in spring sun; mothers munching
the hay that scatters the field,
calves nestling and bunching;
nine here, five there.

In the south pasture
a mother licking a new face,
wet, shining white; one more
than if counting had taken place
yesterday.

COMMUNICATION

We were away that summer day;
the well went dry, the water supply
dwindled.

The level sank in the pasture tank.
Cattle strayed, hunted for shade,
thirsted.

We came back, discovered the lack
in the sundown hush, made water gush:
replenished.

One cow heard the sound, came close and found
water deep and still; drank her fill,
refreshed.

With a turn of her head, a signal said
water is here: one lusty bellow, loud and clear
echoed.

From fence row and wood, heifer and steer understood;
converged from the field like spokes of a wheel.
Answered.

APPLE TIME

Across far pasture fall winds call;
cows come to tread the orchard sod
beneath the trees and wait on fruit,
wind-loosed, to plummet, limb to earth.

Heads up, expectant, large white lashed eyes
watch and wait on the wind to bring
bright Jonathans rolling within their reach
to be crushed to juice with one jaw motion.

Stilled the wind and the cattle wander.
One old one stays, reaching for branches,
her length extended by a tongue,
trying to bring down one more fruit.

COST

In the sunporch, glass encased,
somehow a junco chanced to err,
found himself a prisoner there
as end to end he sought for space.

He bumped and thumped against the pane
seeking freedom's air in vain.

To save him from the cat, I caught
the feathered heartbeat, and gently then
set him free to fly again:
(With pounding fear was freedom bought.)

GO GENTLY

Bundle of fur shuddered on road edge;
regular yowl-bleeps wired his pain.
We drove for help through afternoon sun;
vermillion wine-maple flared in the firs,
blooded the hillsides.

Interminable wait in antiseptic room,
accompaniment of caged barking.
" best this way.
  Do you want us to . . . ?"
"Yes, Doctor."

The illumined firs quieted with the sinking sun
along the silent miles home. With heart catch
still hurting my throat, misting my eyes,
my mind leaped to the case of his pet food
bought at the sale.

RETURN

Yellow goldfinch with his muted mate
drinks from a rain pool left by April
at the edge of the road beside the gate.

Bright eyed pair: a vivid vision
reflecting sun, etched with precision,
dip and drink,
dip and drink.

Aware of me, away they lilt.
On the line above he and she
tip and tilt,
tip and tilt.

As they sit on the wire ignoring me,
goldfinches make small bird decisions.

KENTUCKY WONDERS

We dropped the bean seed, six to a hill.
Warm rains later pale sprouts pushed,
straightened, lifted twin leaves to the sun.

Poles placed tentlike cornered a square,
were leaned to center, tied with twine.

Bean vine tendrils waver, seek firmness.
A gentle hand eases a lost direction.

They climb counter clockwise, wind upward,
reach pole tips, rest and blossom.

I watch this sure and even progress
bean vines make and wonder why I,
at angles with myself, am always clockwise.

THE DOOR SWINGS

From coping with cloyed and cloistered day
I must step out to smell the cherries ripen,
pause to watch our hen worrying
a radish in the garden row, pecking
white crispness in scarlet globe;

cross the porch where the pansy face
above the mass of bleeding heart
grew two feet to reach for sun.
Simplicities put mind at ease
to search recess of inmost heart;

to find the x in existential self,
determine if the door swings out or in.
Listening to leaf-hid birds sing gladness,
I wonder which . . . return refreshed
to meet demands, my own, in a house called home.

PERSPECTIVE

One day a thick fog screen
blotted the distant scene,
and I saw as never before
the cedar by my door:

a pattern of feathery jade
on a cushion of mist brocade,
delicate intricate fronds
swaying on graceful wands,
weaving a bold design,
a touch of shadow on shine.

"a therefore dream on the maybe side"

FIRST HOUR

Ravelings of birdsong
are voicing the morning.
Half sleeping, I waken.

Something goes with the dawn
leaving vague emptiness,
an unremembered dream.

Time rolls into consciousness,
hours swell to proper size
and begin divisioning the day.

This moment is mine and whole.
Soon people will slice
my day into pieces.

THE POSSIBLE PROBABLE

How minimize the trivia
to indentify with a larger dream
in crossword puzzle days,
6 over, 9 down?

Lost list, wrong file,
there goes the tactless telephone:
fetters of fulfillment
curb and cling.

So I'll clear the cluttered tables
(life being so daily)
and hurry out to catch
a little dream.

SURE CURE?

I am annoyed by physical ills,
dislike taking a dozen pills,
and how I resent the doctor bills.

I do not want to be puny and weak;
I wish for myself a fine physique,
to be brave and strong instead of meek.

Maybe resentful, but not a sham,
I must accept me as I am,
so I turn to compose a dithyramb:

a poem of wild irregular strain,
a lyric in honor of the reign
of Dionysus: Anyone for Champagne?

POINT OF TIME

A plate fell:
polished petal-patterned shards
littered the floor.

Better perhaps,
the all at once
than the slow wearing away,
loss on loss,
stain on stain,

with never again
the brightness the petal pattern
once was.

WATCHING WINDFALLS

Tone shaped pears drip
from
trees
some bruise

Down is only so far
(knowing having been)
up limitless
till limits are defined

I shape my loneliness
to fit needs of those
loved
then reach up with greed

THE SUM OF

Afraid of unknown how,
I never dared deep swiftness
to taste a therefore dream
on the maybe side.

Warmed by the sun of my content
I walk a windblown way,
following river bank
lace edged with ripples;
probe deep thought pools,
listen to water music
shaped by stone . . .

with tawny echo of a sigh
I watch a dragon fly.

SLEEP IS A DELICATE THING

Sleep is a delicate thing,
a diaphanous quilt that eases
the mind to erase the day.

Fortunate ones respond
to repose, accept the coverlet,
settle and sink away.

To those who toss through the grey
stillness with tight and tortuous
tumble of racing mind

sleep is nirvana, a refuge
sought in a prayer for peace
they are hoping to find.

Blessed the dream at last
like drifting to drown,
like swirling fog overcast,
like a weight pressing down,
heavily, heavily . . .

PROMISE OF LIGHT

Alone on the lawn in this pre-sun hour
    I listen
        to spaces between the stars
as night thins away
to promise of light.

Maple leaf whispers catch in my breath;
    dark shadows
        perch on the dawn edge.
In this brief world
of unhurried beginnings
            do not touch my silence.

RETIREMENT

Our young love knew
a bright world.

We carved our stones,
separate but equal;

built these waiting-rooms
for comforting.

They have picture windows
on a grim world.

A SUDDEN CLARITY won the Human Voice Quarterly's 1966 "Voice of the Year" book manuscript award, which consisted of at least one (1) share of American Telephone & Telegraph Co. stock and a 30% royalty book publication contract for the winning title.

The "Voice of the Year" award is presented yearly to a new American poet who is discovered by the Human Voice Quarterly. No manuscript competition is ever held, while the new poet is chosen from among the new writers just beginning to appear. The Human Voice contends that in the routine course of writing and publishing, the poet competes for an audience, and that it is most fitting that this activity ought to be awarded, more after the inspiration of the National Book Awards than the Yale Series Of Younger Poets and other such competitions.